

The Four Pillars in Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Novels of Shashi Deshpande deal mostly with social concerns and mirror real life. Every single novel showcases the pathetic situations into which women are forced either by parents, husband, relatives or the society, as a whole. But *A Matter of Time* is one of its kinds. This novel projects a male protagonist besides the three strong female pillars supporting the story. Readers can rest assured that Deshpande is never going to put at stake her feminist perspective, even when the novel takes the man, Gopal, as its protagonist. Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati are the three women from the three generations of the same family, the latter ones being the daughters of the former. Gopal is the son-in-law of Kalyani, the husband of Sumi, and the father of Aru. Two more powerful characters next to the afore-mentioned pillars are Manorama and her brother, Shripati, as glimpses can be found about the fears of Manorama, the mother of Kalyani at certain point in the novel. So, the title is aptly chosen as *A Matter of Time*, since the story revolves around these four pillars along with the other two supports in due course of 'time'.

Gopal marries Sumi with an initial agreement that at any point of time in future, when either of the two seeks freedom from their relationship, the other should readily accept without any disapproval. Sumi accepts light heartedly, thinking that such a day would never arise. But upon facing an unpleasant situation at his workplace, Gopal decides to get rid of all his ties and lead a solitary life. He approaches Sumi and declares that he is walking out on her and their three adolescent children, Aru, Charu and Seema. This solitude cannot be equated with the *Vanaprastha* that the kings of ancient Indian history have undergone. After sufficiently enjoying marital bliss, kingship and fulfilling all the duties as a responsible householder, a king retires to the forest to lead the life of a sage. But coming to Gopal, a reader may find it as a kind of escapism. At the point when he has to stay bold with composure and fight to prove his point right, he shows his back and flees from the situation like a coward. Not only that, he also leaves behind him three unsettled daughters, when it is most essential to stay and guard them till their future has been established.

This behavior of Gopal is due to his improper parentage. Gopal is born to a man who impregnates his brother's wife. So he is caught trapped in a web of relationships where none of his relatives can be really owned by him. His father's wife is not his mother. His mother's husband is not his father. Neither is his sibling his father's daughter. So, it is at a very primary stage of his mental growth that he has lost his sense of belongingness. In a state of utter confusion with his inner conflict, he even draws a parallel from Hamlet, the tragic hero of Shakespeare. He once says "it was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parents' story entered my mind. Just that once, though, for I slammed the door on it immediately. In this story my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman compliant, a pregnancy and a child to come and then, after the husband's convenient death (no, I couldn't, I just couldn't make my father poison his brother) a marriage of convenience!" He is never able to digest the fact that his father was never a father to him, and says "He was my mother's guilty partner, he was Sudha's uncle, her stepfather, he was my mother's husband...." The realization that his sister, Sudha and he did not share the same father shatters his equilibrium. As he later reflects, "That was a betrayal that cut away at the foundations of my life." (Deshpande, 1996: 43) From this it is quite clear that Gopal has been nurturing a sense of loneliness as is evident from his ruminations.

Even when he sees Sumi nursing her baby and holding it to her bosom, Gopal lacks a sense of belongingness as he categorises the mother and child as one entity, pushing him away. Despite the fact that Gopal can be categorized under the negative column due to his abandonment of his family, his childhood and his relative situation in his (or not his) family demands respect and a soft-corner for Gopal.

Kalyani's mother, Manorama is a disappointed soul as she has not been blessed with a son. Out of her fear that all her property would go into the hands of Kalyani's husband, since she is the sole heir of their property, Manorama hastily gets her brother, Shripati, married to Kalyani. The consanguineous marriage curses the offspring and a mentally challenged son, Madhav, is born to them, besides Sumi and Premi. The boy is lost

in the railway station at the age of four, when Kalyani tries to board a train in haste. Shripati accuses her of purposefully leaving the insane son and he walks out on her. It is only when Manorama pleads with him on her death-bed that he obliges to come back to the Big House, to satisfy the last wish of his dying sister. Even then, the breach with Kalyani is the same and the valley never bridges its gap, till the death of Shripati towards the end of the novel. Kalyani's only satisfaction is the social display that the man and wife are living under the same roof. In reality, Shripati lives in the single room upstairs and all his regular requirements are supplied to him there, in absolute silence. The quietude begins to shatter when Sumi takes him on a scooter ride, when – for the first time in the novel – he opens his heart and expresses his feelings for his lost son. But before he could totally shed his inhibitions his life is lost.

Sumi, though horrified at the sudden and impulsive decision of Gopal, regains her composure. She keeps quiet and displays absolute stability, which is received in a negative approach by Kalyani and Premi. They come to a conclusion that Sumi is indifferent towards the tragedy inflicted to her. They meet Gopal and persuade him to come back. He only states that it is not Sumi's fault and leaves at that. Both Kalyani and Premi are left perplexed at his vague response. Kalyani is distraught and fears that her fate is going to reflect on Sumi. It would be not only traumatic, but also disgraceful to have a married daughter with three kids coming back to her maternal home. Kalyani, having borne with her husband's indifference towards her for quite a long time, is aghast on knowing that history is repeating itself in Sumi's case too.

Sumi is quick to regain her composure and even when she is brought back to the Big House, she seeks an independent life. She realizes the inner strength frozen within her and struggles to bring it out. She learns to drive a scooter, to avoid dependence of any sort. She takes up a job in a school and writes the screen play for a drama to be enacted by the students for the school function. Aru appreciates her mother's creativity thereby motivating her to take up further writing. She successfully supports her daughters socially, monetarily and denies any kind of financial assistance from Gopal. Extreme stoicism of Sumi is exhibited when she meets the disapproving comments from women like Shanker's mother:

When are you going back to your husband . . . you should be with him. Look at his state! It's all right to stay with your parents for a while, but that's not your home. When my daughters come home, I don't let them stay long. Go back to your husband, he's a good man. If you've done something wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has women shouldn't have any pride. (Deshapnde, 1996: 161)

But even before she could prove her worth, and establish her independent existence, she is killed in a road accident along with her father, Shripati. She only turns back for a second to look at her father, opening up for the first time, when a bus hits her scooter and they lay down, dead.

Aru, only a teenager, falls into a deep mire. She is confused as to what to do and whom to approach. Her loving parents are split apart all of a sudden, with no hint of the oncoming tragedy. This is too hard a bite for her to chew and digest. She meets her friend, who is also a lawyer and seeks her help. She wants to sue her father seeking maintenance for the three daughters. But her friend replies to her disappointment that according to Manu, maintenance can be granted only to parents, wife and sons, but it cannot be sanctioned to or demanded by daughters. A sea change can be seen in the psychological development of Aru towards the close of the novel. Her reactions after the death of her mother and grandfather are spell-bound. At the sight of Kalyani, who is shattered, Aru says, "Amma, I'm here, I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son, I'm here with you" (Deshpande, 1996: 233). In spite of the enormous amount of grief hidden in her heart and the pining to get united with her father, she exhibits perfect stoicism and tells Gopal, "Yes, Papa, you go, we'll be quite all right, don't worry about us (246). Aru exerts the concentration of a rope-walker with grief and responsibility weighing down at both the ends erecting her as the sole sustainer of the Big House – Viswas.

The personification of the Big House and naming it as Viswas is a point worth a mention. Each next generation is a girl child and only a girl child. Even that girl grows up, gets married but ultimately finds back her path towards that house. When Shripati leaves her, Kalyani gets back to Manorama; when Gopal deserts his daughter and grand daughters, Shripati brings them back to the Big House. 'Viswas' has been rightly named to the house, since there is always trust that the daughters are welcomed there and are protected carefully. Even after the demise of Shripati and Sumi, Aru reassures her grandmother that she is there. So 'Viswas' is never-ending in that 'Big House'.

Even though the character of Manorama is present quite briefly in the novel, her reference is always drawn by her daughter, Kalyani. This makes her another indispensable part of the novel. This compels the readers to draw a conclusion that, in spite of the fact that the three generations of women – Kalyani, Sumi and Aru are the predominant female characters in the novel, Manorama is, all said and done, the mother of Kalyani. This places her at the top of the generation list, making the hierarchy into four generations of women from the same family.

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* attempts in showcasing the complexities of human relations and emotional pressures through a single family extending to a span of three generations. Aspects like belongingness, independence, consanguineous marriages, heredity, importance of son, pride, social reputation

are all woven into it. A philosophical note is also reflected in the accidental death of Sumi at the juncture where she is fully prepared to begin her life afresh.

The novel, *A Matter of Time*, depicts the middle-class mindset, traditional constraints, struggle for liberation identity crisis and physical, mental and emotional violence on women. The point of self-pity is totally ruled out. Kalyani's character is an apt depiction of emotional suffering and craving for self-identity. Sumi presents the problems of monetary suffering. Gopal is the embodiment of social suffering. Thereby true to its sense, the four pillars of the novel depict all the four crises.

REFERENCE:

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